

‘THE ROCK WHENCE YE ARE HEWN’:  
*THE BOOK OF EBENEZER LE PAGE* AND  
 GUERNSEY LITERATURE AND HISTORY

It say in the Bible ‘Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged.’ Well, those people are the rock whence I was hewn, and the hole of the pit whence I was digged. I haven’t said nothing about my cousins, and the cousins of my cousins; but then half the island is my cousins, and the cousins of my cousins.<sup>1</sup>

*The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* was published posthumously in 1981 and was highly praised on publication by such major contemporary novelists as John Fowles and William Golding.<sup>2</sup> The novel sold well and created an interest in Guernsey life that it had seldom attracted before. Doubtless the vivid local colour of the book and its evocation of Guernsey’s ‘otherness’ within modern British and European culture had a large part to do with its success. The circumstantial details of the publication of the novel offer the stuff of good journalistic copy. *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* is Edwards’s only published novel. He began it when he was in his late sixties; he made a few unsuccessful attempts to publish it when he was in his early seventies; and it was finally published in 1981, five years after his death in 1976. Very little else is known of Edwards’s life. He was born on Guernsey in 1899, but left the island as a young man to study at Bristol University. He seems to have visited Guernsey on only a couple of occasions after that. He married and had children but was estranged from them for most of his life. He moved in literary circles in London in the 1920s and 1930s, and he published a few pieces in Middleton Murry’s *Adelphi*. Literary acquaintances such as Stephen Potter and John Collis thought him a genius and were disappointed that he published so little. After a career as a civil servant and adult education tutor, he ended his days as a lodger in a tiny room in Weymouth, the closest point on the mainland of Britain to Guernsey.<sup>3</sup>

The popular success of the novel was not, however, matched by its reception among literary critics and scholarly readers. Little academic work has been published on the novel or its concerns, and it is seldom adopted as a set text

<sup>1</sup> G. B. Edwards, *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982 [originally published 1981]), p. 28. All subsequent references to the novel will be to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Although Fowles had never met Edwards, he contributed an enthusiastic introduction to the Penguin edition of 1982. Golding’s review referred to ‘this extraordinary book’, and he chose the novel as his ‘Book of the Year’ in *The Sunday Times*. See Edward Chaney, ‘G. B. Edwards—Author of *Sarnia Chérie: The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*’, I: *Review of the Guernsey Society*, 50 (1994), 64–71; II: *ibid.* 51 (1995), 12–19; III: *ibid.* 51 (1995), 90–99 (here I, pp. 64–65).

<sup>3</sup> These details can be found in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel by John Fowles and, at greater length and in fuller detail, in the personal memoir of him by Edward Chaney, who encouraged Edwards to finish the novel and who is the model for Neville Falla in it. See Chaney’s article in three parts (above, n. 2).

on university literature courses. This is a waste because it has much to interest us beyond its mild exoticism and the odd circumstances of its writing and publication, for example the author's fine ear for the 'Guernsey English' in which the fictional autobiography is written, the obliqueness of Edwards's use of narrative voice, and the profound insight into island life and personal failure. Edwards's greatest achievement, however, goes beyond naturalism and a compelling way with narrative and character. It lies in the exploitation of the ironic contrast between the narrator's settled life and limited views and the profound and rapid changes in Guernsey society and, by extension, in the modern world at large. As the story moves to its conclusion, the simplicity of its events and the lives of its characters take on a transcendent cast, as if the small island were a microcosm on which matters of mythical scope and significance were being played out.

At first sight the materials of the narrative seem unprepossessing, and one of Edwards's great achievements is to make Ebenezer's story and the story of his island so moving in spite of this. In doing this, he deliberately turned his back on the mainstream of Guernsey literature, which tends to emphasize romance and heroism, the sea, and a feeling for the exotic. A significant proportion of the eighty or so novels that have been written about life on the island are set in the past: sometimes the colourful Elizabethan period, such as Harold Carey's *De Beauvoir the Masterful*;<sup>4</sup> sometimes more recently, such as the Napoleonic period of John Oxenham's novels, written in the early twentieth century. The dominant fictional genre is the adventure story, often written for children, both boys and girls. Many of these stories feature some escapade that involves being stranded by one of the treacherous tides for which the island is (justly) notorious, or, if the action is set on Sark, a vertiginous moment on La Coupée, a hundred metres above the pounding waves. Almost all stories exploit Guernsey's picturesque beauty and scenery, its long and interesting history, and its quaint customs: ancient feudal families dominated by their *seigneurs*, the steep winding medieval streets of St Peter Port, the thatched cottages and country lanes, especially the distinctive 'water lanes', the dramatic coastline, the volatile weather of the English Channel, with its gales and fogs, responsible for many shipwrecks. This type of 'guide book' approach to life on the island is heightened by the dominant plot motif of the holiday or short visit, a 'visitor narrative', which is very common—not surprisingly, perhaps, as tourism had become Guernsey's main industry by the interwar years.<sup>5</sup> Austen Clare's *The Little Gate of Tears*<sup>6</sup> contains many of these features and may serve as an exemplar. It is set on Guernsey c. 1800. The heroine is Denise Tourtel, the beautiful daughter of an ancient family that has lived at Vavelin for generations in an old Guernsey farmhouse, complete with 'green bed'<sup>7</sup> and mighty hearth

<sup>4</sup> Harold Carey, *De Beauvoir the Masterful*; or, *The Adventures of Cartaret Sausmarez de Beauvoir in the Days of Elizabeth* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent; Guernsey: Frederick B. Guerin, 1906).

<sup>5</sup> See L. James Marr's *History of the Bailiwick of Guernsey* (London and Chichester: Phillimore, 1982), pp. 221 ff.

<sup>6</sup> (London: John Long, 1906).

<sup>7</sup> A large day-bed piled high with ferns, which was a feature of many houses in country Guernsey until the Second World War.

in the kitchen. There is abundant local colour: proverbs, songs, food, houses, and folklore, including the midsummer pagan festival of 'La Môme'. Denise is pursued by rival lovers: the handsome Jersey sailor Gaston le Patourel, and a wealthy man who is sixteen years older than her, Jérémie le Clerc. There is much mild eroticism associated with dancing on St John's Eve. Eventually, Gaston is killed and Denise goes mad, later spending much time wandering by the sea. Jérémie reveals himself finally as Gaston's murderer and commits suicide.

In contrast, the life of Ebenezer Le Page has been uneventful and, in many respects, unappealing. He has left Guernsey only once in his life, for a day trip to the neighbouring island of Jersey to watch a football match. His father's ancestors were quarrymen in the north of the island (as were Edwards's own), but Ebenezer does not follow his father's line of work. Until well into middle age, he lived in the family home with his widowed mother, and he never married or fathered children (not legitimate ones at any rate). He epitomizes the legendary meanness of Channel Islanders: his earliest memory is of saving pennies in his money box, and he manages to read into the words of the Sermon on the Mount—'lay not up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt' (Matthew 6. 19)—an encouragement to hoard his own wealth in gold sovereigns, stored in a box buried in the garden. He prospers in the unromantic career of a 'grower' of tomatoes under glass. Without making a big issue of it, he managed to avoid serving in the First World War, and so was spared a part in the glorious but tragic fortunes of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry. He makes many conquests in his relations with women—indeed, there is something very unpleasant about his callous pursuit of sex—but he conspicuously fails to persuade Liza Quéripel, the love of his life, to marry him. As he ages, his wealth increases but his happiness and peace of mind decline. All he could do during the German occupation in the Second World War was, like everyone else, struggle to keep from starvation, but he has an angry cynicism towards attempts to capitalize on the wartime years for the sake of tourism. As far as he is concerned, it was the period of Guernsey's shame, when islanders looked the other way while slave workers from eastern Europe were locked up in concentration camps and worked to death. The one heroic and selfless act of Ebenezer's life is the murder of a German guard whom he had discovered sexually assaulting a prisoner. When Ebenezer begins to write his book, he believes that he is the oldest man on the island, and he is completely alienated from its contemporary culture of tourism and offshore finance. He dislikes almost all foreigners: English, French, and Americans especially. The people of the neighbouring island of Jersey are the worst of all, and even those from the south of Guernsey itself cannot be trusted. It would not be hard to see him as an object lesson in the problems of 'insularity'.

One of the reasons for the scholarly neglect of the novel is that it is hard to pigeon-hole, and this is more than a matter of unfamiliar locations, events, and characters. Although Edwards was widely read in the modern novel, as Chaney

demonstrates,<sup>8</sup> *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* does not seem to fit the modernist matrix of style or themes, and its subject-matter, the history and culture of a small island, can easily seem at odds with the metropolitan consciousness of modernism.<sup>9</sup> The situation has not been helped by the absence of a literary history of Guernsey, or of any of the Channel Islands for that matter.<sup>10</sup> There is therefore a pressing need for an interpretation of the context of the novel, or, to pursue Ebenezer's metaphor, an understanding of 'the rock whence it is hewn'.

To begin with, this metaphor of the rock is very resonant. The literary allusion is not just to the Bible (Isaiah 51. 1), suggestive on several levels,<sup>11</sup> but to the dedication to Victor Hugo's novel about Guernsey life, *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (usually translated as *Toilers of the Sea*), where he describes the island as '[le] rocher d'hospitalité' ('rock of hospitality').<sup>12</sup> Hugo believed in a bizarre yet suggestive theory that the Channel Islands were made up of huge rocks that had broken away from France in a wild storm and floated off, whereupon they were gathered up by England. The beautiful blue granite stone of the island is still visible everywhere, from grand buildings to cottages, walls, and pavements. Its quarrying in the nineteenth century transformed the island's rural economy, stimulating immigration and providing work and wealth for many, including Edwards's own family, but it also destroyed large sections of its beautiful coastline.<sup>13</sup> Much of this rock ended up crushed to make aggregate for building the roads and pavements of English industrial cities.

One of the standard ways of establishing literary context is by locating a work in an author's œuvre, but this is not possible in this case as *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* is Edwards's only published novel. We do know, however, the important detail that it was not intended to stand alone, but to be the first volume of a trilogy.<sup>14</sup> The original full title for the one published volume is

<sup>8</sup> Chaney, II, 16–17. The major influence on Edwards was D. H. Lawrence, but Chaney remembers Edwards as very well read, especially in modern novelists such as Conrad and Lawrence, but also in less well-beaten tracks such as Kazantzakis, Solzhenitsyn, and Patrick White. This is confirmed in the reminiscence of John Stewart Collis, who met Edwards in the late 1920s: 'The first two [Walt Whitman and Edward Carpenter] were introduced to Stephen Potter and myself by our mutual friend and mentor, G. B. Edwards, and I doubt if we would have come upon them at the right time otherwise.' See Collis, *Bound upon a Course* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1971), p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> There are passing references to literature about Guernsey or written by Guernsey authors in many general histories, for example in Marr's *History of the Bailiwick of Guernsey*. Duncan King's article, 'The Imaginative Literature of the Channel Islands', *Transactions of La Société Guernesiaise*, 22 (1987), 274–95, is indispensable, but it is bibliographical in nature and King does not offer sustained analysis or criticism of any of the texts he cites.

<sup>11</sup> See my 'The Book of Ebenezer Le Page: Guernsey and the Channel Islands in the Twentieth Century', in *Proceedings of the Second International Small Island Culture Conference*, ed. by Henry Johnson (Sydney: SICRI, 2006), pp. 54–60.

<sup>12</sup> Hugo's novel was first published in 1866. All quotations are taken from *Œuvres complètes de Victor Hugo*, vols x and xi (Paris: Paul Olendorff, 1926–27). The English translation is by W. May Thomas (London and New York: Dent, 1961 [first published 1911]).

<sup>13</sup> Hugo makes the point in his novel that the area in which much of the action takes place in the earlier part of the nineteenth century had disappeared by the time of writing.

<sup>14</sup> These details, and the scant few other facts of Edwards's life, can be found in the introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel by John Fowles. They are based on memoirs and reminiscences of some of Edwards's friends, including Edward Chaney, whose support of the novel and of

*Sarnia Chérie: The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, and this was to be followed by *Le Boud'lo: The Book of Philip le Moigne* and *La Gran'-mère du Chimquière: The Book of Jean le Féniant*. Each of the novels was to contain a book within the book. Although Edwards never made more than notes for the second and third volumes, there are some important inferences to be drawn from this plan. The possibility of other volumes counters the sense of resolution and optimism that is so strong in the last pages of the novel. After a long old age of loneliness and alienation, Ebenezer forms an unlikely friendship with Neville Falla, a young artist as disaffected with modern Guernsey as he is, who becomes, without knowing it, Ebenezer's heir: literally, in that Neville will inherit 'Les Moulins', Ebenezer's granite house where he has lived all his life, and all his other money, including the cache of gold sovereigns; figuratively, in that Neville, although a very different character from Ebenezer, will provide a continuity of Guernsey culture, an outlook on life, which seems to be fading everywhere else on the island. It is significant, therefore, that Edwards had planned an early death for Neville in volume II of the trilogy. Edwards's view of Guernsey's future was clearly not one of uncomplicated optimism, and irony is one of the most important of his literary tropes.

Something of the novel's literary context can be gained from the many references to other books in the novel itself, although Ebenezer's own reading is confined largely to the *Guernsey Evening Press*. He seems to have read only one novel in his life, but it is a very powerful and significant intertext: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of this novel in the European tradition. Rousseau accorded it an honoured place in the education of Émile (1762); indeed, for a long time it was to be his only reading. In particular, it was one of the few texts other than Shakespeare's plays specified for study in school English courses in the nineteenth century. The novel has a particularly significant place in the literature of islands. Diana Loxley explains this by seeing *Robinson Crusoe* as a foundation text of British imperialism, 'the model for "coping" with the world and its otherness, whether environmental, bestial or native'.<sup>15</sup> As such, the book was endlessly rewritten in the nineteenth century in those island stories that seem such a central part of the discourse of colonialism: Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1800), the stories of Jules Verne, Marryat's *Masterman Ready* (1841), and Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858).

There are several important parallels between the two novels. Robinson's uncertainty about an heir at the end of the story echoes Ebenezer's worries, and there are some similarities between Robinson's patronage of Friday and Ebenezer's role in Neville's life as a substitute for his dead father. Crusoe's gradual acceptance of his fate and his deep sense of the working of providence remind us also of the strong Calvinist traditions of Guernsey. In the end, however, reading *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* as if it were an updated version of *Robinson Crusoe* leads us up the wrong path. Guernsey is not an uninhabited desert island, but an island dense with human habitation, readily displaying in

Edwards himself was of great importance. For more details see Chaney's article in three parts (n. 2 above).

<sup>15</sup> Diana Loxley, *Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 8.

the landscape the evidence of its long settlement and intermixture of cultures: Neolithic, Celtic, Roman, Norman, French, and English. Ebenezer is not a solitary in the same way as Robinson Crusoe. As he says, half the inhabitants of the island are his cousins and the cousins of his cousins. Nor does he have difficulty finding someone to talk to. He is a solitary in a deeper sense, however. After Liza Quéripel has rejected his final offer of marriage, he returns to Les Moulins and finds that 'the house was empty, empty! I was alone and I knew I would be alone for the rest of my days. I don't know how I have managed to live since then' (p. 261). Ebenezer never reconciles himself to solitude in the way that Robinson Crusoe does during his twenty-eight years on the desert island. Ebenezer is a solitary in another sense as well: a relic of a culture that he believes is now almost extinct, speaking a language that few other people understand, and alienated in almost all ways from the post-war Guernsey culture of tourism and offshore finance.

Ebenezer's 'voice' dominates the narrative, but he is not the only centre of consciousness in it. Although it is tempting to conflate his views with those of Edwards himself (John Fowles, for example, regards Ebenezer as Edwards's 'alter ego'), we miss a great part of the novel's irony if we read it in such a naive fashion. In a letter to Lisa Chaney in 1974, Edwards commented that '[Ebenezer] is definitely not me under cover, nor my mouthpiece. He often says things I know to be untrue: at others he doesn't say all he knows, and sometimes things which say more than he knows he means.'<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Edwards comments on his need for 'obliqueness': 'I have emerged with the feeling it is hopeless for me to try writing anything head on—it has for me, I think, always to be done obliquely'.<sup>17</sup> Much of *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* concerns the tragic life of one of Ebenezer's host of cousins, Raymond Martel. If we have to have an alter ego for Edwards among the characters, then Raymond is a better choice. For a start, he is much more of an intellectual than Ebenezer and has read extensively in areas that bear upon Guernsey's culture and history and on the cultures of small islands generally. Ebenezer's judgement of Raymond's habits is revealing and in character: 'I am not sure all that reading do a fellow much good' (p. 54). The books associated with Raymond are a more illuminating guide to the literary context of the novel than *Robinson Crusoe*.

Raymond is better educated than Ebenezer; he wins scholarships, and when he leaves school he is employed in the Greffe, the Guernsey civil service. Ebenezer lists some of Raymond's reading at the time; it is typical of the habits and tastes of the generation of upwardly mobile clerks in the period before the First World War, epitomized in such contemporary fictional characters as Leonard Bast in *Howards End* and Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers*. It consists in part of popular middlebrow authors such as Florence Barclay, who specialized in romances that combined a gentle eroticism with an uplifting moral purpose. Particular novels of Barclay are not mentioned, but it is almost certain that her best-seller, *The Rosary*,<sup>18</sup> is intended. Although it is set in aristocratic circles and there are no references either to Guernsey or to island life, the story of

<sup>16</sup> Chaney, 'G. B. Edwards', III, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Edward Chaney, 29 August 1974, in Chaney, 'G. B. Edwards', III, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Florence L. Barclay, *The Rosary* (London: Putnam, 1909).

*The Rosary* bears upon *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* (and on Raymond's experiences) in a number of interesting ways. First, the male hero of the novel, Garth Dalmain, falls for a woman as she sings a religious song in which there is an ambivalence between human and divine love: Jane Champion's singing of 'The Rosary' foreshadows Christine Mahy's singing of the hymn 'O love that will not let me go' in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*. Second, Jane actually hears a housemaid singing that hymn at a crucial moment in *The Rosary*. The third point of contact between the two novels is a striking use of the phrase 'my wife' to describe Raymond's sense of intimacy with Christine even before they are married or, in the case of *The Rosary*, before Garth's proposal has been accepted.

The other authors mentioned at this point in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* bear more specifically on island life and on Channel Island life in particular. Loxley comments on the upsurge of interest in the 'ethnographic' novel in the second half of the nineteenth century, in which 'descendants of Robinson Crusoe made manifest their resourcefulness in struggles on desert islands or the high seas'.<sup>19</sup> One beneficiary of this interest was the 'other' British Isles. For example, Hall Caine, one of the most popular writers in England between 1900 and 1930, wrote a series of novels in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about life on the Isle of Man, and his novel *The Manxman* is mentioned here by name.<sup>20</sup> The Isle of Man's constitutional status, a dependency of the British Crown outside the United Kingdom, with its own ancient parliament and legal and financial system, is similar to that of the two bailiwicks of Guernsey and Jersey. Caine's stories dwell on the otherness of Manx life: its political independence, its distinctive language and social institutions, its exotic sayings and beliefs. The close but antithetical relationship between witchcraft and Puritanism that he identifies is also typical of Channel Island literature, as I shall discuss later. The plot of *The Manxman* has some interesting parallels to Edwards's novel: the vying of two cousins, who deeply love each other, for the love of the same woman; and the theme of unsuitable marriage bringing down a promising career.

The third author mentioned is John Oxenham, a prolific author in many different genres, but interesting here because of his romances of Channel Island life, the most notable of which is *Carette of Sark*.<sup>21</sup> Ebenezer comments elsewhere on Raymond's interest in Guernsey's history, something that leaves him cold for the most part. Oxenham's novel is set in the Napoleonic period on Sark, a small island near Guernsey and part of its bailiwick, famous for its dramatic coastline and unspoilt natural beauty, but also for the survival intact into modern times of the feudal constitution and economy developed at its foundation in the late sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The plot again revolves around the love of a man and a woman, who overcome all sorts of obstacles, especially the

<sup>19</sup> *Problematic Shores*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Hall Caine, *The Manxman* (London: William Heinemann, 1894).

<sup>21</sup> John Oxenham, *Carette of Sark* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907).

<sup>22</sup> Sark feudalism is well explained by Marr, *History of the Bailiwick of Guernsey*, pp. 55–59. See also the work of Victor Coysh, a writer on the Channel Islands whom Edwards admired, e.g. *The Channel Islands: A New Study* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1977).

complex enmity of the hero's father and half-brother. There are various themes and plot devices here that are echoed in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, such as the estrangement between Raymond and his parents, especially his rejection by his father, and his intimate relationship with his cousin Horace. Along the way there are heroic and swashbuckling scenes with privateers and pirates as well as spectacular maritime scenes and feats of swimming.

A little later in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, after the First World War, Ebenezer reveals a change in Raymond's tastes. As he remains isolated in Castle Cornet, trying to escape the flu epidemic, Raymond reads four volumes of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) in French. This is reading of a different literary order, and there is a clear suggestion that Raymond's tastes have been refined and deepened by his experiences as a soldier. It is surprisingly little known, however, that Hugo wrote most of this masterpiece on Guernsey itself, during his eighteen-year exile in the Channel Islands in the 1850s and 1860s, fifteen of these years spent on Guernsey. Hugo was fascinated from first to last by the islands and their culture. The last of his books to be published in his lifetime (although more appeared posthumously) is *L'Archipel de la Manche* (1883), prepared from notes that he had made soon after he moved to the islands.

It is the novel of Hugo's that is not mentioned, however, which is the most significant intertext. *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, published in 1866, is surely the greatest work of Guernsey literature. (I have seen it referred to provocatively as the finest British novel written in French.)<sup>23</sup> Although it is not mentioned by name in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page*, it seems hardly likely that Edwards had not read it; there are important interrelationships everywhere, implicit and explicit, between his own novel and Hugo's.<sup>24</sup> These relationships are seldom straightforward matters of borrowings and allusions; often the relationship

<sup>23</sup> This raises a major issue when talking about the literature of the Channel Islands. For most of that history the literary culture of the islands was French. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, a Norman French *patois* was spoken almost universally in the islands, with distinct dialectal variations not just between the individual islands but sometimes within them. This is Ebenezer's native language, his usual method of communication within his family, and in old age in the 1960s still his preferred medium at moments of intense feeling. To put this into historical perspective, Ebenezer's mother, born we can infer in the 1860s, spoke little English but read the English Bible—this detail is very significant. Ebenezer's grandmother, born perhaps in the 1830s or 1840s, spoke no English at all and read only the French Bible. There was a long tradition of writing in French in the islands going back to the Middle Ages. The most famous Guernsey writer in French is George Métivier, an amateur philologist who wrote copious amounts of poetry in the Norman dialect of Guernsey in the nineteenth century.

Edenezer does not refer to any of this Guernsey French literature, although he expresses deep regret throughout the narrative for the loss of the island's *patois*. But then Edenezer is not a literary man. It is more interesting that Raymond does not seem to have read or been influenced by this native literature, but elsewhere it is mentioned in the novel that Raymond's mother had forbidden him to speak *patois* after he had started at the secondary school. Ebenezer's attitude to French as a language and to French people is a paradoxical phenomenon. When speaking of Victor Hugo's statue in Candie Gardens, Guernsey, he refers to the author as a 'famous Frenchman', despite Hugo's long and productive residence on the island. Elsewhere, Ebenezer tells us 'I didn't like the French, and I think most Guernsey people felt the same. I thought they was dirty' (p. 123).

<sup>24</sup> In 1975, in a letter to Edward Chaney designed to sell the novel to a publisher, Edwards commented that 'Victor Hugo and Elizabeth Goudge have both written of Guernsey, but one was a Frenchman and the other is an English lady; and, whatever merits their stories may have, they



between the books is ironic, pointing up directions that Edwards did *not* take in the plot or characterization of his novel or offering a different view of Guernsey's history and culture in its themes. For example, the struggle to the death with the giant octopus (*la pieuvre* or 'devil-fish'), which is one of the most memorable events in Hugo's novel, and which spawns a host of imitations in other Guernsey novels,<sup>25</sup> is surely parodied in Ebenezer's struggle to land the conger eel that he catches by accident in the last days of the German occupation, when he and everyone else is close to starvation.

Although *Les Travailleurs de la mer* is neither a first-person narrative nor a fictional autobiography, Gilliatt, its hero, is also a solitary figure. Like Gilliatt, Ebenezer has a close relationship with his mother, although his response to her death of old age and sickness is within the usual bounds of filial affection and contrasts with the effect on Gilliatt, for whom

cette morte fut pour le survivant un accablement. Il était sauvage, il devint farouche. Le desert s'acheva autour de lui. (x. 407)

the loss of his mother was a terrible blow [. . .] His disposition had always been unsociable; he became now moody and sullen. The solitude around him was complete. (p. 9)

Ebenezer is neither sullen nor unsociable, although he comes to regret having lived so much on his own and suspects that most people think that he is 'funny in the head'. The quotation captures the generic difference between the novels: like so many other stories about Channel Island life, Hugo's is cast in a romantic mould, the inheritor of that nineteenth-century flowering of interest in the ethnographic novel; its plot is a narrative of extremes and its characters are larger than life. Edwards seems to have toned down these narratives deliberately, in order to make Ebenezer and his world part of the normality of life in the islands during the twentieth century. Both Ebenezer and Gilliatt are disappointed in love and both novels end with acts of generosity and reconciliation. Gilliatt, however, gives away his beloved to another man in an act of supreme (and arguably unnecessary) self-sacrifice. The novel's closing pages depict his suicide, as he calmly surrenders himself to the treacherous waters of the Channel that he had so recently conquered. Whereas Ebenezer is a man of native wit and feeling who is simply not very well educated, Gilliatt is 'un esprit troublé et un grand cœur sauvage' (xi. 113) ('a powerful intellect clouded; a great spirit wild and untaught' (p. 242)).

Gilliatt is linked to the supernatural, which seems the only explanation for some of his prodigious achievements: Mess Lethierry's response to Gilliatt's greatest achievement, the single-handed salvage of the engine and funnel of a steamship that has been wrecked on the Rochers Douvres, is:

On t'aurait brûlé il y a cent ans. C'est de magie. Il ne manque pas une vis. (xi. 284)

Why, they would have burnt you a hundred years ago! It's magic! There isn't a screw missing. (p. 335)

are completely unconvincing to a born and bred Guernseyman' (Chaney, 'G. B. Edwards', III, p. 98).

<sup>25</sup> e.g. George Motley's *Legend and Romance* (London: Digby, Long, [1892]), John Oxenham's *A Maid of the Silver Sea* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, [1910]), and John Dunord's *A Labouring Gentleman: Being a Story of the Channel Islands* (London: Arthur H. Stockwell, 1930).

Gilliatt is viewed as ‘une espèce de voyant de la nature’ (XI. 79) (‘a kind of seer amid the secrets of nature’ (p. 223)). His habit of haunting the Neolithic remains of the island (or ‘Druidical’ stones as they are mistakenly called in the novel), especially those on L’Ancresse Common, is proof to the common mind that he is involved in witchcraft. This part of the plot is surely rewritten ironically in *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* in the episode where Neolithic stones and bones are discovered in Ebenezer’s own garden near the Common. It seems that one of Ebenezer’s ancestors converted part of a Stone Age barrow into a trough for feeding pigs, and the husband of one of Ebenezer’s cousins decorated a garden wall for him with Neolithic axe-heads. In another twist, Ebenezer lands himself a part-time job looking after the site for the government.

From the beginning of his novel, Hugo identifies one of the most distinctive aspects of Guernsey’s history, its preoccupation with questions of belief, especially the relationship between the Christian religion and witchcraft, and the struggle within Christian culture between Church and Chapel. If the intertextual relationship with Hugo’s novel is not understood, it will be hard to appreciate the significance of religion in Edwards’s novel. *Les Travailleurs de la mer* opens on Christmas morning at 9 o’clock, and Hugo identifies the sectarianism that lies at the heart of Guernsey Christianity:

Guernesey, toute petite île qu’elle est, a de la place pour deux religions [. . .] à Guernesey chaque religion est chez elle. (x. 200–01)

small as is the island of Guernsey, it has, unfortunately, plenty of room for differences of religion [. . .] in Guernsey every religion has its own domicile. (pp. 62–63)

The influence of Calvinism was especially strong on the island and it was reluctant to accept the mainstream of Anglican practice, clinging tenaciously to its Presbyterian form of church government until the late seventeenth century.<sup>26</sup> This Puritanical ethos was reinforced by the practice of appointing Protestant clergymen from France, almost always of Calvinist inclinations, to minister to the needs of French-speaking parishioners. Later on, this theological tendency was strengthened from a different direction in the form of the strong Methodist presence; John Wesley himself visited the island in 1787 to preach. Hugo comments wryly on

cet archipel puritain, où la reine d’Angleterre a été blâmée de violer la bible en accouchant par le chloroforme. (x. 162)

that Puritanical Archipelago, where the Queen of England has been censured for violating the Scriptures by using chloroform during her accouchements. (p. 40)

Not everyone is touched by the same zeal, however. Gilliatt’s mother goes neither to church nor to chapel, leading to the conclusion that she must be French. Similarly, Mess Lethierry’s churchgoing was merely perfunctory and he displayed a conspicuous hatred of priests. His ‘levain d’athéisme’ (x. 202) (‘leaven of atheism’ (p. 63)) is likewise ironically explained by his sojourn in France. Mess Lethierry’s beautiful niece, Déruchette, is promised to Gilliatt

<sup>26</sup> See Raoul Lemprière, *The Channel Islands* (London: Robert Hale, 1990) p. 85 (originally published as *Portrait of the Channel Islands*, 1970).

when he accomplishes the salvage of the steamship, which occupies much of the central portion of the novel, but she has already fallen in love with a young clergyman, another Ebenezer as it happens, Ebenezer Caudray. In a supreme act of self-sacrifice, Gilliatt gives up his claim, and one of the closing scenes of the novel is the marriage of Ebenezer and Déruchette.

The other side of this Christian sectarianism is the widespread belief in witchcraft on the island. To other Guernsey people, Gilliatt's great skills and abilities, as well as his solitariness, can be explained only by witchcraft. He is not liked by his neighbours since, among other things, he lives in a house that is reputed to be haunted. This is more than a matter for just Gilliatt, however. Such beliefs characterize the whole area of the Channel Islands and the neighbouring Cotentin:

Celles de la Manche, archipel anglais et littoral français, ont sur lui des notions très précises. Le diable a des envoyés par toute la terre. (x. 99)

among the Channel Isles, and on the neighbouring coast of France, the ideas of the people on this subject are deeply rooted. In their views, Beelzebub has his ministers in all parts of the earth. (p. 3)

Hugo comments of the Ruelle [lane] Coutanchez in St Malo that 'de mesure à sorcière il n'y a pas loin' (x. 280) ('tumbledown houses and sorcerers always go together' (p. 108)). But there is something particularly acute about these beliefs in Guernsey: 'rien n'est moins rare qu'un sorcier à Guernesey' (x. 102) ('nothing is commoner than sorcerers in Guernsey' (p. 5)); and Hugo relates that the last burning for witchcraft occurred in 1747. Certainly, prosecutions and convictions for witchcraft continued into the twentieth century, and many books testify to the continued beliefs and practices into modern times. As recently as 1914, a Mrs Lake (née Queripel, interestingly) was brought before the Royal Court of Guernsey on a charge of witchcraft, found guilty, and sentenced to eight days' imprisonment.<sup>27</sup>

In many ways *The Book of Ebenezer Le Page* begins with the same axis of oppositions, but Edwards's response is characteristically to inflect the dualities with greater subtlety. Ebenezer comments that people cannot imagine how much religion there was on the island before the First World War (p. 85). He is baptized in the Vale Church and hopes to be buried in its churchyard, but his own family is torn between his father's upbringing in the Church and his mother's in the Chapel. The religion of Ebenezer's mother is a particularly potent force in the novel. Although Ebenezer is a good son and displays great care for his mother, her religion is of the most uncompromising Calvinist kind. Evidence of her Bible reading is liberally sprinkled throughout the text of the novel, as is her rigid belief in providence and the strict distinction between the elect and the reprobate. She has deserted one sect of the 'Brethren' because she believed that their hymn-singing to music was sinful and now worships with another that sings hymns unaccompanied. She was disappointed at the liberation in 1945 because she believed that the German occupation marked the beginning of 'the End'. The other side of the triangle is provided by Liza Queripel, the object of Ebenezer's great and hopeless love. She is present at

<sup>27</sup> See Marie De Garis, *Folklore of Guernsey* (St Peters, Guernsey: Marie De Garis, 1975), p. 184.

the beginning and end of the narrative, and is clearly opposed structurally and thematically to the presence and influence of Ebenezer's mother. Although Liza has not 'a spark of religion' in her (p. 189), her grandmother is widely reputed to be a witch and her family home is at Pleinmont in the extreme south-west of the island, an area that Hugo says is notorious for witches.<sup>28</sup>

The theme of religion assumes greatest importance with the tragic story of Raymond. After the First World War, Raymond trains for the Methodist ministry in England. He tells Ebenezer that his conversion is based on the faith that 'Jesus saves', but he also confesses much later that the sin from which he has been saved is masturbation, particularly masturbation driven by fantasies about men. There is always a dangerous ambivalence in Raymond's religion between human and divine love, which ultimately proves to be his undoing. At first it seems that he might make a very suitable marriage to the daughter of the head of his theological college, but as his training nears its completion and he approaches the preaching of his first sermon on the island, it becomes clear that he is deeply in love with Christine Mahy, the daughter of a disreputable family that is despised by Raymond's parents.

The turning-point of the narrative in every sense is Raymond's first and only sermon, preached at Bordeaux Mission. It occurs almost exactly half-way through the book, in the twenty-eighth of the novel's sixty chapters. Although Raymond looks very much the young minister, Christine is dressed in a way that is both striking and strikingly inappropriate, plain and sexually provocative at the same time. Ebenezer comments wryly that 'she might have been the Virgin Mary in person' (p. 224). He remembers for the rest of his life Christine's singing on that day of the hymn 'O love that will not let me go'. The daring ambiguity of her interpretation of the words is epitomized in her performance of the hymn in church in bare arms.

The sermon is the deep expression of 'Raymond's religion and the whole of his religion' (p. 227). Its text, 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Matthew 28. 20), affirms Raymond's sense of the centrality of Christ and of the love, human and divine, which binds all creation. Jesus is now in heaven, "'in the heart of God. He is the love in the heart of God [. . .] the whole creation is afloat in Christ", he said, "or Christ is not at all"' (p. 228). After the sermon, Ebenezer is overwhelmed by the sight of Raymond and Christine together, 'like two souls in love' (p. 231), but their intimacy and marriage leads to the destruction of Raymond's relationship with his family and friends. When Raymond loves Christine, he feels that 'I love the whole world and everybody in it' (p. 235), but the truth is that Raymond's love for her is the dark side of his life. Ebenezer comes to feel that Christine was not really human at all, that she was the 'most callous and cruel person, and the most vain and selfish woman I have ever known' (p. 226). Christine's name itself ironically invokes suggestions of the Anti-Christ. Raymond's beloved cousin, Horace Martel, who later has a

<sup>28</sup> The literature on the folklore of the Channel Islands is vast. An early example is John Linwood Pitts, *Witchcraft and Devil Lore in the Channel Islands* (1886). The most recent novel about Guernsey that I have been able to find, Elizabeth George's crime thriller *A Place of Hiding* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), also makes much of the superstition still current on the island.

brief affair with Christine, calls her 'the bottomless pit' (p. 289). In comparison, Liza is human through and through, despite her witch of a grandmother, her illegitimate children to different fathers whom she gives away, her collaboration with the Germans during the occupation, and her condemnation of Ebenezer to a life of loneliness.

After the sermon, Raymond is summoned to England by his church hierarchy to explain himself. Instead of defending his unorthodox pantheist theology diplomatically, he responds by denying the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection as well for good measure. He promptly turns his back on the ministry for good and returns to his clerical job in the civil service of the island. It is really all downhill for him from now on: the hopes of preferment and wealth that Christine had entertained are extinguished and Raymond's family will have nothing to do with him. Christine's affair with Horace produces a child, Gideon, and eventually she moves with her children to England. Raymond does not even have the solace of his close friendship with Horace. He lives in cheap lodgings and leads a dissolute life. For a while, he practices the homosexual life that one feels is always just beneath the surface of the novel, and he comes close to suicide. In particular he loses his faith in Christ, coming to hold bizarre opinions, for example that Judas was the only disciple who truly loved Jesus and that Jesus's promise that the only way to salvation was through him was a kind of totalitarianism comparable to Hitler's and Stalin's. Raymond is rescued for a time in different ways by Ebenezer and by Liza, but eventually his sad and disappointed life ends during the occupation with what looks like a joint suicide with Horace.

What does remain is the legacy of Raymond's religion, even if he lost his own faith, and it returns in the grand climax of the novel when Ebenezer, now an old man, has found friendship in Neville Falla and reconciliation with Liza. On the drive home with Neville after meeting Liza for the first time in many years, Ebenezer is overwhelmed by the beauty of the island. The culminating vision of the island in the novel can only be conveyed and understood, however, through Raymond's words: 'it is a glimpse of the world as God made it [. . .] on the first evening of the first day' (p. 480). Ebenezer sees the island transfigured: 'the rocks was not rocks, nor the sea sea, yet they was as real as real' (p. 480). Everywhere he looks he sees waves of joy and light. In a metaphor drawn from a childhood memory of climbing the ladder in the granite quarry with his father close behind him, Ebenezer knows that 'there is SOMEBODY HERE' (p. 481). The Day of Judgement will surely turn out to be the Day of Forgiveness, when the repentant and the unrepentant sinner will be one with Christ in paradise. It is a sublime moment of resolution—although probably a temporary one—of some of those problems of belief, insight, and human relationship identified by many other writers about life on the island of Guernsey.